

StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Star flowers

The art of blooming, and losing

A magnolia in Minnesota seems an improbability. Just today the tree beyond the picket fence is beginning to weep a slow scattering of white — the final movement of its lilting annual symphony. For 19 years now and against odds, it has kept the promise of spring — bringing a blossomy fulfillment even as simpler human promises remain unkept. They whisper at us — these broken particles of promise — as though we needed reminding of our imperfection, and of the magnificent faithfulness of a fragile tree.

And it is a tree now — entirely a tree. The year the gardener set it into the soil, it was a scrawny foot-high joke. Then slowly it assumed the look of a diminutive bush, and then an impressively bushy bush — and sometime in its early teens became a wild tangle of impudent branches. That's when the pruning shears came out, and the lecture as well: The journey of becoming, the pruner explained, invariably involves sacrificing a heap of pretty might-have-beens.

Yet even as limbs were lopped, the tree-in-the-making stood silent and still. The magnolia has never been a traveler — but for the brazen sailing trip that brought *Magnolia stellata* from Japan in the mid-1800s. In the decades since, it has found its way into the yards of the most daring of northern gardeners. Usually the newcomer takes root and blooms where it's planted.

Usually, but not always. Magnolia watchers are an attentive bunch, and most can tell you where the city's finest specimens can be found. But every once in a while, sad news will filter among the gardeners: That stunning tree in the corner lot by the creek, someone will say, has fallen to ill fate. Still, when the watchers pass its flowerless bones, they cannot help but slow down, and look, and sigh. It's no small thing when beauty gives way to barrenness.

No small thing, agrees the gardener. This year, she speaks to the magnolia — her magnolia — from the far side

of the fence. She can't quite say which snip of the pruning shears or what icy gale sent her onto the sidewalk, but she sees the forsaken might-have-beens in every drifting petal the magnolia casts off. That's the thing about beauty, she tells herself: First you see it, and then sometimes you don't. She remembers loving someone who grew wistful the minute spring took on its first green:

"As soon as you feel it," he'd say, "it leaves."

True enough, she thinks — and thus has life always been. She looks at the tree with fresh curiosity, watching as it so humbly relinquishes its starry white. For

two decades, she realizes, it has practiced the art of blooming and losing — ultimately excelling at both. Lacking a wise magnolian soul, the gardener cannot claim the same. She remembers with an ache the days of looking down upon this majestic creature from the library window — of taking its thousand-flower song for granted because next year would come soon enough.

And now next year has come. Though the magnolia is the same tree she loved from within the fence, she is not quite the same woman. No surprise in that, she thinks: Just as the magnolian journey involves reaching for the sky, the human journey entails seeking beyond the horizon. The magnolia takes loss in stride; the human heart grieves it, and makes of it a bowl to carry the joys.

She thought, at first, that leaving the tree meant losing it. But now she sees that it has taken root in her heart — not merely in a particular piece of earth. Wonderful chapters of her life-book live among its branches, and nothing can erase the tale. She has learned, at least, that loveliness transcends ownership — just as love outlasts time. And there's a good chance — though never a certainty — that her magnolia will greet another spring, and then another. Its falling flowers seem to say that no fence — no human fault — can keep beauty from coming to us.



Nancy Rose/Special to the Star Tribune